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THE DANGEROUS CLASSES.

IT HAS been our habit to look for national disaster from the lower strata of society. We fear the ignorance and vice of the masses. We see the appalling instances of recklessness and brutal violence in the haunts of infamy, as they are recorded in the daily press, and naturally conclude that this element of evil only needs growth—such growth as the rum-shop and a bribed police will promote—in order to overthrow the existing order and carry desolation through the land. The reasoning is just. We have seen in our own country what a power for evil these debased classes are, in the riots of 1877. New York city saw these wild forces at work in 1863. History will ever point, as to one of her most conspicuous pages, to the Reign of Terror in bleeding France, where the fierce passions of men who were nearest the brute made havoc with all that was beautiful, or orderly, or good. But he whose mind rests upon these lower classes as the cause of these horrors is no philosopher. He is content with a superficial view. A philosophical analysis of the explosions of the populace which have so often desolated neighborhoods and nations would reveal a series of causes leading far away from the populace itself. In ancient Greece, the revolutions which established the democracies were movements of the lowest classes of the people; but, before these risings, we find in many instances the tyrannical oppressions of a despot and his court, which to-day would be styled a “ring.” It was the long period of fearful oppression in France, represented by the selfish and voluptuous courts of Louis the Fourteenth and Louis the Fifteenth, during which the peasant was but a beast of burden or a tool of greed, which produced the reaction of the Revolution. Gunpowder is innocent until you ignite it. The coarse vice which prevails in the

lowest classes can be perilous to the State at large only as it is turned into insurrectionary channels by the gross injustice of the higher classes. This coarse vice may indeed do local harm. It may generate thieves, burglars, and murderers, and it certainly will do this, but the ordinary machinery of government is sufficient to keep these developments in check. The motives which lead to the local crimes are not those which produce revolutions. They are simply personal greed or enmity. These local crimes can seldom move a multitude, or, if they do, the movement takes the shape of a temporary riot. The lowest classes are in themselves the dangerous classes only so far as this.

The greater danger — the danger compared with which all this local disorder is as nothing, the danger which threatens the uprooting of society, the demolition of civil institutions, the destruction of liberty and the desolation of all — is that which comes from the rich and powerful classes in the community. What we have to fear is the encroachments of these influential elements upon the rights of the people, until, under a sense of oppression, the people, who are naturally timid and slow to act in organization, are forced into united resistance, which necessarily (from the constitution of the masses) becomes destructive to civilization and social well-being. Mere demagogues, even with socialistic or nihilistic ravings, are of no avail with the masses, unless a real grievance of a formidable sort supports them. Herr Most is only ludicrous in America, but in Russia he would be a firebrand to a magazine. It should be our aim, amid our liberties, to prevent our country from becoming a Russia.

The form in which danger threatens us is that of units of vast money-power. Power-units are the cause of oppression everywhere, and in this country the power that is recognized is money. Dynastic power and military power are not present dangers, and probably never will be, except as outcomes of revolution caused by the abuses of the money-power. But everything with us fosters the accumulation of money in the hands of a few individuals or of allied corporations (allied for their common success). The endless resources of material wealth in our mines and our means of communication enable the quick and unscrupulous to become oligarchs of this money-power, ordinary ability and honesty being run over and trampled under foot in the competition. The men who wield this power can control legislatures,

courts, and executive officers, and so cover their tyrannical acts with the semblance of legality. Their most oppressive conduct will be shown in obedience to some law, or, at least, in opposition to no law. Where favorable legislation for them is not obtained, unfavorable legislation is prevented. But is not this bribery? Of course it is. But it is bribery prosecuted with all the refinement of art and all the dignity of statesmanship. It is bribery so sinuously practiced, and on so colossal a scale, that the public eye is dazed and the public mind deceived or bewildered. Under its effects, transactions which, in the narrow sphere of a petty thief, would send him to prison, are wrought on every side in the millions of railway stocks, and the perpetrators remain as members of the most reputable political and commercial society of the land. Men of this stamp are even elevated to the highest offices of state—men whose daily life has violated every principle of justice.

It is by the growing power of this class of tyrants that our country's safety is now threatened. And the danger will come in two forms: the demoralization of society and the sanguinary vengeance of the oppressed. The morals of a community work downward from the higher classes. Like priest, like people. Corrupt the prætorium and you corrupt the empire. A licentious Court will be imitated in every provincial neighborhood. If the educated and wealthy classes of America treat fraud as a virtue, we shall have dishonesty the characteristic of the whole nation. Trickery will be counted for wisdom, and lying for prudence. We shall reach the happy condition of Turkey and Persia, where every man has to guard against his neighbor as a thief, and find security for himself and his property only in cunning, falsehood, and secrecy. That this demoralization is fast affecting our society is evident in the light way in which our newspapers speak of flagrant outrages upon justice, and the readiness with which the manipulators of nominations (and the electors themselves) forget the baseness of men whom they set up as candidates and seek to place in responsible office. Men who have been sentenced to punishment by our criminal courts are nominated and elected. Both nominations and elections are promoted and sustained by what are known in the community as honest and honorable men. Furthermore, these men whose lives have been marked by fraud and other immoralities are admitted into social circles which are called pure, their wealth or their serviceableness in behalf of

wealth being a sure passport. In this way the poison permeates all society. The source, as we have seen, is in the units of vast money-power, a power which effectually crushes everything that opposes.

Beside the moral desolation caused by this aggregation of wealth in a few hands, the political safety of the country is especially endangered. The making and maintaining this concentrated wealth demands a system of plunder and oppression of the poorer classes and of the public generally. Prices are made, not through the natural laws of demand and supply, but by "corners" and conspiracies. Fair competition, which is the life of trade, is utterly crushed by the giant foot of this money-swollen monster. A few monopolize the entire trade of any given article by reason of their money-power, remorselessly destroying any one who dares even to glean in the field they have made their own by robbery. The word "robbery" is not a misnomer, for the money has been forced from unwilling hands by immoral, though sometimes legal, means. A widow, having the care of a family of small children, puts her money in railway stock. She is advised to do so by a director in the railway. It is the widow's all. Soon afterward this director, and a few with him, seeing the importance of their road and its capabilities, determine to secure a controlling interest in the stock for themselves, thus both increasing their investment in a profitable concern, and at the same time obtaining a power to do what they please with the road thereafter, as occasion may demand. Accordingly, their first step is to run the stock down. This they accomplish by paying agents to go to places where the stock is owned, and, by brief articles in the local newspapers, to insinuate that the road is shaky. Every little fact against the road is exaggerated. If a dividend has been passed in order to an important improvement, this omission of a dividend is ascribed to the road's approaching bankruptcy. By these means the public are soon led to believe that the road is financially a failure. Our poor widow holds on to her stock, until from par it drops to twenty-five. She is then thoroughly frightened. She hears many now say, "Sell out your stock, or you'll lose all." So she sells her stock and loses three-quarters of her property, which even before was only enough to keep her and hers in the ordinary comforts of life. Meanwhile, our high-minded director and his partners, having brought the stock down to a low

enough figure, buy it all in through their agents. Soon the stock mounts to its original value, and our director has made a million dollars by the transaction. The widow is financially ruined. How? By the rascality of the director, who has been to her as truly a merciless tyrant as ever was Nero or Caligula to the Romans. He has by fraud wrested from her her living to increase his enormous wealth. This is but an instance of what is done daily by these money-magnates. The fraud takes different shapes according to the circumstances, but the system of amassing lordly fortunes now in practice is essentially a fraudulent system. And cruelty is the natural companion of fraud. A rich concern makes twenty-five per cent. on its capital for ten years, and has then more than trebled its property. It employs three hundred workingmen at wages that just support them and their families. A year comes in which the managers perceive that they can only make seven per cent. instead of twenty-five. At once they discharge two hundred workingmen into poverty and despair. The men have worked faithfully in trebling their employers' fortunes, and now, to save a trifle of these trebled fortunes, these faithful men are cast out without mercy. This is a common form of the cruelty of the wealthy units among us.

The power exercised in fraud and cruelty knows no limit for either except in its own interests. Individuals are directly and indirectly cheated. Not only are laws framed for the benefit of the moneyed oppressor, but his power enables him to refuse obedience to wholesome laws. If any laws should be most carefully and equitably administered, they are those which relate to the taxes of the community. Every citizen should bear his equal proportion of the public burdens. Yet the wealthy units have no difficulty in throwing the weight of taxation upon the poorer classes, by evading the payment of their legitimate taxes. A college professor by my side, getting a meager salary of \$2000 a year, and having as his only property a mortgage of \$10,000, conscientiously pays his $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. (\$250) a year of personal tax on this mortgage, receiving as interest only $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. (\$350), while a neighbor worth three millions pays not one cent of personal tax, although he is owner of fifty mortgages, beside a large amount of railroad stock. By a fiction of debt he escapes his tax. The wealthy units practice this trick almost universally, and the authorities are perfectly aware of it. Their wealth is the power that protects them.

If suits should be commenced against any of these wrongdoers, their money enables them to tire out the complainant by the use of technical delays, by spiriting away witnesses, and by corrupting courts. This is so well understood that no one who has any worldly wisdom dares to enter the lists of law against any one of these gigantic reservoirs of capital, and they on their side understand this impunity and immunity, and improve it diligently. These power-units of wealth gather about them a *clientèle* of faithful, because well-paid, dependents, who speak, write, and act for them as occasion demands, and who by their wit and effrontery manage to guide much of public opinion in behalf of their masters. Some of these dependents are editors of influential journals, who skillfully make the worse the better reason and call evil good, so that honest-minded readers are found to be sympathizing with the unfortunate capitalist, against whom the wicked proletariat says such hard things.

But this state of things cannot always continue. The sense of oppression on the part of the people at large becomes deeper and stronger. They begin to learn that their reform leaders are bought up by the money-power, and that the so-called reforms are but tubs thrown to the whale. They see that only violent measures can relieve them, and a common feeling of revenge unites them. Now comes the catastrophe. At the first stroke they find themselves a power, and when men first discover their power they are reckless how they use it. They carry destruction on every side. They revel in slaughter. They waste property. They burn dwellings. They overturn all institutions. They paralyze trade. They annihilate society. The tyranny of the moneyed units has accomplished what nothing but tyranny can accomplish—the united action of a heterogeneous and naturally unorganized populace. It has raised a spirit of evil which it cannot allay. It has unchained the tiger and whetted his appetite for blood. These must not be considered as exaggerated prophecies. History shows that we are sober in our statements. The community cannot be plundered forever; combinations of capitalists and legislators to rob the poor for the benefit of the rich will eventually meet with counter-combinations which will not confine themselves to robbery. This is human nature as well as history.

The present peril of our country is exactly here. The dangerous classes among us are those who are engaged in amassing colossal

fortunes—the giants who tread ordinary men under their heel, and care not how much the people suffer. They are absorbed with their own greatness, lifted by their wealth out of all sympathy with the mass of mankind, and live as if the world belonged to them. The cries of want and sorrow are unheeded by them, the appeals of charity and benevolence are spurned, the demand for coöperation in works for the public weal is slighted,—while all their millions are poured into the channels of their own selfishness. In monarchical countries, so long as the people can find a living, they will endure the oppression; but in a republic like ours the time of account will come sooner. Here the people will not wait until they are ruined. They have some notions of rights, and some forethought of impending evil, and they will anticipate their own crisis by making a crisis for others. How is this catastrophe to be avoided? The answer is simple. The dangerous classes must be rendered harmless. But how can this be done? Only by righteous laws, righteously administered. These laws will neither be administered nor made until we put men in office who will spurn bribes direct or indirect. The first thing, then, for the safety of our country is the election of honest and upright men to office. We see now in our legislative halls, gamblers, drunkards, libertines, *et id genus omne*, who must take bribes in order to keep up their licentious lives. A low set of liquor-sellers make the ordinances of the city of New York. Politics are run by rowdies and criminals, with whom decent men cannot associate, except to be defiled. Questions are decided not on their merit, but on the money in them. Until this system is entirely changed, and honest men are elected to office, we can have no check to the dangerous classes and their schemes. And the system will not be changed until rum-shop nominations are ignored, and honest men vote for character and not for party.

The second thing for our safety is the enactment of laws to defend the poor man against the rich oppressor. No man should be allowed to lord it over the industries of the land; no man should be allowed to hold sway over the highways of the nation in an irresponsible absolutism. There must be a limit to individual wealth if we are to be preserved as a republic. Then, corporate wealth should be under strict supervision and its management subject to just governmental control. Furthermore, the wages of the laborer should be secured to him for a year at a time, as in the case of a salaried officer, to be forfeited only for such mis-

conduct as the courts would recognize. Severest penalties should be adjudged for the avoidance of tax-paying, and bribery should be punished by permanent loss of citizenship and ten years' imprisonment.

The third thing for our safety is an executive force, from governor to policeman, who will watch for the public and see the laws enforced. Now we have to support a special private society to enforce any special group of laws, as, for example, the Excise, Gambling, and Treatment of Animals laws. Without these societies there is no effort to stop the infraction of law. Men of integrity and of just pride in their office and its true functions should be the guardians of the law.

Again we insist that these are sober words of ours, to which it were well a lethargic community should give heed. Cease, ye men of pleasure and of business, cease from thinking only of yourselves. Give thought to the community in which you dwell. Do your public duties. Discharge the solemn trusts imposed upon you by your country, your conscience, and your God.

HOWARD CROSBY.